The Polynesian.

Vol. 5. HONOLULU, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1849. No. 40.

THE POLYNESIAN,

The Official Journal of the Hawaiian Government, is published weekly at Honolulu, Oahu, H. I.

CHARLES GORDON HOPKINS, EDITOR.

TERMS.

One copy per annum, in advance, - - - - - - - $6 00
One copy six months, in advance, - - - - - - 3 50
Single copies, - - - - - - - - - - - - 12½

Rates of Advertising.

One square, (16 lines), first insertion, $1,00, each continuance 25 cts.; one half square (8 lines or less), first insertion, 50 cts., each continuance 12½ cts.; Cards, not exceeding one half square, by the year, $6,00; not exceeding one square, $10,00. Yearly advertising not exceeding one half column, $50,00; not exceeding one column, $100,00. Yearly advertising limited to the advertiser's own business.

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HISTORY OF THE CONQUEST OF PERU.

BY W. H. PRESCOTT, ESQ.

Mexico and Peru—the glory and the shame of Spain—rival each other in speculative interest to the philosopher, in deeds of chivalrous daring for the historian, and in commercial importance to the politician. They offer questions the most stimulating to enlightened curiosity—and at the same time the most difficult of solution. It is the peculiar merit of Mr. Prescott that he entered on his task equally conscious of its charms and its perplexities;—supported by the enthusiasm derived from the one to encounter the labours imposed by the other. It is scarcely possible to survey the empire of the Incas without some reference to that of the Aztecs. They present two distinct—and so far as evidence has yet gone two original—types of civilization; developed at no great distance from each other, but never brought into contact—having some striking points of similarity, but still more marked discrepancies. Both illustrate important problems in social progress; but both raise questions which were not mooted in the civilization of the older hemisphere, and for which we should vainly seek an elucidation in the republic of Plato or the politics of Aristotle.

In some respects the work before us is more interesting than 'The Conquest of Mexico,' by which it was preceded. The institutions of the Incas have left permanent traces on the character and condition of the Peruvians:—nearly every trace of the Aztec system had disappeared from Mexico before the generation that witnessed the conquest had quite expired. It was in the name of old traditions and historic associations that Pumacagua proclaimed the independence of Peru in 1815. It was to Peruvian airs, preserved from the days of the "Children of the Sun," that Melgar adapted those patriotic melodies which procured him the name of the Moore of Peru; and it was to the memory of a past dynasty that he made those appeals which General Miller describes as more spirit stirring than the blast of the trumpet. Take one of his snatches of song, translated many years ago in one of our periodicals:—

> Our Incas tombs before ye
> Upheave to meet your tread,
> As if your march of glory
> Had roused the sleeping dead!

Nor is this the only interest which attaches to the civilization of ancient Peru. Never was there a country which, at the first glance, would seem by nature to have been so irrevocably predestined to sterility and barbarism. A strip of sandy land, rarely exceeding twenty leagues in breadth, runs along, and is hemmed in through its whole extent by a colossal chain of mountains, studded with huge volcanoes—so stupendous that it is only the voyager on the distant Pacific who can comprehend the relation of of the several parts to the wondrous whole. The sandy strip which we have described—

> Sees on its soil no heaven-born rain distil,
> And gains no freshness from the scanty rill.

The precipitous steeps of the mountain chain—with its splintered sides of porphyry and granite and its peaks where eternal snow and volcanic fire are engaged in a perpetual struggle for mastery—seem equally unpropitious to the labours of the husbandman; especially as all communication in the long extent of territory might be deemed impossible from the savage character of the region, broken up by precipices, torrents, and those gaping rents of the mountain-chain in which Baron Humboldt declares that Vesuvius itself might be hidden.

But the ancient Peruvians had created a terrestial paradise where nature seemed to have designed a desert. Canals irrigated the coast; terraces were raised on the side of the Cordilleras; orchards and gardens, towns and villages arose on the lofty plateaus; and intercourse was maintained between these numerous settlements by the great roads which traversed the mountain passes and connected the capital with the remotest districts of the empire.

'One of these roads passed over the grand plateau, and the other along the lowlands on the borders of the ocean. The former was much the more difficult achievement, from the character of the country. It was conducted over pathless sierras buried in snow; galleries were cut for leagues through the living rock; rivers were crossed by means of bridges that swung suspended in the air; precipices were scaled by stairways hewn out of the native bed; ravines of hideous depth were filled up with solid masonry; in short, all the difficulties that beset a wild and mountainous region, and which might appal the most courageous engineer of modern times, were encountered and successfully overcome. The length of the road, of which scattered fragments only remain, is variously estimated from fifteen hundred to two thousand miles; and stone pillars, in the manner of European mile-stones, were erected at stated intervals of somewhat more than a league, all along the route. Its breadth scarcely exceeded twenty feet. It was built of heavy flags of freestone, and in some parts, at least, covered with a bituminous cement, which time has made harder than stone itself. In some places, where the ravine had been filled up with masonry, the mountain torrents, wearing on it for ages, have gradually eaten a way through the base, and left the superincumbent mass—such is the cohesion of the materials—still spanning the valley like an arch!

Over some of the boldest streams it was necessary to construct suspension bridges, as they are termed, made of the tough fibres of the *maguey*, or of the osier of the country, which has an extraordinary degree of tenacity and strength. These osiers were woven into cables of the thickness of a man's body. The huge ropes then stretched across the water, were conducted through rings or holes cut in immense buttresses of stone raised on the opposite banks of the river, and there secured to heavy pieces of timber. Several of these enormous cables, bound together, formed a bridge, which, covered with planks, well secured and defended by a railing of the same osier materials on the sides, afforded a safe passage for the traveler. The length of this aerial bridge, sometimes exceeding two hundred feet, caused it, confined as it was only at the extremities, to dip with an alarming inclination towards the centre, while the motion given to it by the passenger occasioned an oscillation still more frightful, as his eye wandered over the dark abyss of waters that foamed and tumbled many a fathom beneath. Yet these light and fragile fabrics were crossed without fear by the Peruvians, and are still retained by the Spaniards over those streams which, from the depth or impetuosity of the current, would seem impracticable for the usual modes of conveyance. The wider and more tranquil waters were crossed on *balsas*—a kind of raft still much used by the natives—to which sails were attached, furnishing the only instance of this higher kind of navigation among the American Indians.'

Perhaps even these roads were not the most signal proof of the skill which the people of the Incas evinced in construction. Their architecture was at least equally wonderful. The ruins of Cuzco are as well calculated to excite admiration as those of Thebes.

'The fortress, the walls, and the galleries were all built of stone, the heavy blocks of which were not laid in regular courses, but so disposed that the small ones might fill up the interstices between the great. They formed a sort of rustic work, being rough hewn except towards the edges, which were finely wrought; and, though no cement was used, the several blocks were adjusted with so much exactness and united so closely, that it was impossible to introduce even the blade of a knife between them. Many of these stones were of vast size; some of them being full thirty-eight feet long by eighteen broad, and six feet thick. We are filled with astonishment when we consider that these enormous masses were hewn from their native bed and fashioned into shape by a people ignorant of the use of iron; that they were brought from quarries from four to fifteen leagues distant, without the aid of beasts of burden, were transported across rivers and ravines, raised to their elevated position on the sierra, and finally adjusted there with the nicest accuracy, without the knowledge of tools and machinery familiar to the European. Twenty thousand men are said to have been employed on this great structure, and fifty years consumed in the building. However this may be, we see in it the workings of a despotism which had the lives and fortunes of its vassals at its absolute disposal, and which, however mild in its general character, esteemed these vassals, when employed in its service, as lightly as the brute animals for which they served as a substitute.'

Connected with the roads, we may notice the Peruvian system of posts;—one of the few institutions which they had in common with the Aztecs.

'The system of communication through their dominions was still further improved by the Peruvian sovereigns by the introduction of posts, in the same manner as was done by the Aztecs. The Peruvian posts, however, established on all the great routes that conducted to the capital were on a much more extended plan than those in Mexico. All along these routes small buildings were erected, at the distance of less than five miles assunder, in each of which a number of runners, or *chasquis*, as they were called, were stationed, to carry forward the despatches of government. These despatches were either verbal or conveyed by means of *quipus*, and sometimes accompanied by a thread of the crimson fringe worn round the temples of the Inca, which was regarded with the same implicit deference as the signet ring of an Oriental despot. The *chasquis* were dressed in a peculiar livery, intimating their profession. They were all trained to the employment, and selected for their speed and fidelity.

As the distance each courier had to perform was small, and as he had ample time to refresh himself at the stations, they ran over the ground with great swiftness, and messages were carried through the whole extent of the long routes, at the rate of a hundred and fifty miles a day. The office of the *chasquis* was not limited to carrying despatches. They frequently brought various articles for the use of the court; and in this way, fish from the distant ocean, fruits, game, and different commodities from the hot regions on the coast, were taken to the capital in good condition, and served fresh at the royal table. It is remarkable that this important institution should have been known to both the Mexicans and Peruvians without any correspondence with one another; and that it should have been found among two barbarian nations of the New World, long before it was introduced among the civilized nations of Europe.'

The attention of the Peruvians to agriculture must next engage our notice.

'The Inca himself did not disdain to set the example. On one of the great annual festivals, he proceeded to the environs of Cuzco, attended by his court, and, in the presence of all the people, turned up the earth with a golden plough—or an instrument that served as such—thus consecrating the occupation of the husbandman as one worthy to be followed by the Children of the Sun. The patronage of the government did not stop with this cheap display of royal condescension, but was shown in the most efficient measures for facilitating the labors of the husbandman. Much of the country along the sea coast suffered from want of water, as little or no rain fell there, and the few streams, in their short and hurried course from the mountains, exerted only a very limited influence on the wide extent of territory. The soil, it is true, was, for the most part, sandy and sterile; but many places were capable of being reclaimed, and, indeed, needed only to be properly irrigated to be susceptible of extraordinary production. To these spots water was conveyed by means of canals and subterraneous aqueducts, executed on a noble scale. They consisted of large slabs of freestone, nicely fitted together without cement, and discharged a volume of water sufficient, by means of latent ducts or sluices, to moisten the lands in the lower level, through which they passed. Some of these aqueducts were of great length. One, that traversed the district of Condesuyu, measured between four and five hundred miles. They were brought from some elevated lake or natural reservoir in the heart of the mountains, and were fed at intervals by other basins which lay in their route along the slopes of the sierra. In this descent a passage was sometimes to be opened through rocks, and this without the aid of iron tools; impracticable mountains were to be turned; rivers and marshes to be crossed; in short, the same obstacles were to be encountered as in the construction of their mighty roads. But the Peruvians seemed to take pleasure in wrestling with the difficulties of nature. Near Caxamarca, a tunnel is still visible, which they excavated in the mountains, to give an outlet to the waters of a lake, when these rose to a height in the rainy seasons that threatened the country with inundation.'

While the plains were thus redeemed from barrenness, the sides of the mountains were not neglected.

'Many of the hills, though covered with a strong soil, were too precipitous to be tilled. These they cut into terraces, faced with rough stone, diminishing in regular gradation towards the summit; so that, while the lower strip, or *anden*, as it was called by the Spaniards, that belted round the base of the mountain, might comprehend hundreds of acres, the uppermost was only large enough to accommodate a few rows of Indian corn. Some of the eminences presented such a mass of solid rock, that, after being hewn into terraces, they were obliged to be covered deep with earth, before they could serve the purpose of the husbandman. With such patient toil did the Peruvians combat the formidable obstacles presented by the face of their country! Without the use of the tools or the machinery familiar to the European, each individual could have done little; but acting in large masses, and under a common direction, they were enabled by indefatigable perseverance to achieve results, to have attempted which might have filled even the European with dismay. In the same spirit of economical husbandry which redeemed the rocky sierra from the curse of sterility, they dug below the arid soil of the valleys, and sought for a stratum where some natural moisture might be found. These excavations, called by the Spaniards *hoyas*, or 'pits,' were made on a great scale, comprehending frequently more than an acre, sunk to the depth of fifteen or twenty feet, and fenced round within by a wall of *adobes*, or bricks baked in the sun. The bottom of the excavation, well prepared by a rich manure of the sardines—a small fish obtained in vast quantities along the coast—was planted with some kind of grain or vegetable. The Peruvian farmers were well acquainted with the different kinds of manures, and made large use of them; a circumstance rare in the rich lands of the tropics, and probably not elsewhere practiced by the rude tribes of America. They made great use of *guano*, the valuable deposit of sea fowl, that has attracted so much attention of late, from the agriculturists both of Europe and our own country, and the stimulating and nutricious properties of which the Indians perfectly appreciated. This was found in such immense quantities on many of the little islands along the coast, as to have the appearance of lofty hills, which, covered with a white saline incrustation, led the conquerors to give them the name of the *sierra nevada*, or snowy mountains.'

The agricultural implements of the Peruvians were not very perfect; but they were superior to those of any other native race in America.

'They had neither the iron ploughshare of the old world, nor had they animals for draught, which indeed, were nowhere found in the new. The instrument which they used was a strong, sharp pointed stake, traversed by a horizontal piece, ten or twelves inches from the point, on which the ploughman might set his foot and force it into the ground. Six or eight strong men were attached by ropes to the stake, and dragged it forcibly along—pulling together, and keeping time as they moved by chanting their national songs, in which they were accompanied by the women, who followed in their train to break up the sods with their rakes. The mellow soil offered slight resistance; and the laborer, by long practice, acquired a dexterity which enabled him to turn up the ground to the requisite depth with astonishing facility. This substitute for the plough was but a clumsy contrivance; yet it is curious, as the only specimen of the kind among the American aborigines, and was perhaps not much inferior to the wooden instrument introduced in its stead by the European conquerors.'

Among the articles cultivated, the cuca appears to have been the chief favorite.

'This is a shrub which grows to the height of a man. The leaves when gathered are dried in the sun, and, being mixed with a little lime, form a preparation for chewing, much like the betel-leaf of the east. With a small supply of this cuca in his pouch, and a handful of roasted maize, the Peruvian Indian of our time performs his wearisome journeys, day after day, without fatigue, or, at least, without complaint. Even food the most invigorating is less grateful to him than his loved narcotic. Under the Incas, it is said to have been exclusively reserved for the noble orders. If so, the people gained one luxury by the conquest; and, after that period, it was so extensively used by them, that this article constituted a most important item of the colonial revenue of Spain. Yet, with the soothing charms of an opiate, this weed, so much vaunted by the natives, when used to excess, is said to be attended with all the mischievous effects of habitual intoxication.'

The potato, also, was largely cultivated. 'Whether indigenous to Peru, or imported from the neighboring country of Chili, it formed the great staple of the more elevated plains under the Incas, and its culture was continued to a height in the equatorial regions which reached many thousand feet above the limits of perpetual snow in the temperate latitudes of Europe. Wild specimens of the vegetable might be seen still higher, springing up spontaneously amidst the stunted shrubs that clothed the lofty sides of the Cordilleras, till these gradually subsided into the mosses and the short yellow grass, *pajonal*, which, like a golden carpet, was unrolled around the base of the mighty cones that rose far into the regions of eternal silence, covered with the snows of centuries.'

The Peruvians were not less eminent as shepherds than as farmers.

'Of the four varieties of the Peruvian sheep, the llama, the one most familiarly known, is the least valuable on account of its wool. It is chiefly employed as a beast of burden, for which, although it is somewhat larger than any of the other varieties, its diminutive size and strength would seem to disqualify it. It carries a load of little more than a hundred pounds, and cannot travel above three or four leagues in a day. But all this is compensated by the little care and cost required for its management and its maintenance. It picks up an easy subsistence from the moss and stunted herbage that grow scantily along the withered sides and the steeps of the Cordilleras. The structure of its stomach, like that of the camel, is such as to enable it to dispense with any supply of water for weeks, nay, months together. Its spongy hoof, armed with a claw or pointed talon to enable it to take secure hold on the ice, never requires to be shod; and the load laid upon its back rests securely in its bed of wool, without the aid of girth or saddle. The llamas move in troops of five hundred or even a thousand, and thus, though each individual carries but little, the aggregate is considerable. The whole caravan travels on at its regular pace, passing the night in the open air without suffering from the coldest temperature, and marching in perfect order, and in obedience to the voice of the driver. It is only when overloaded that the spirited little animal refuses to stir, and neither blows nor caresses can induce him to rise from the ground. He is as sturdy in asserting his rights on this occasion, as he is usually docile and unresisting. The employment of domestic animals distinguished the Peruvians from the other races of the New World. This economy of human labor by the substitution of the brute is an important element of civilization, inferior only to what is gained by the substitution of machinery for both. Yet the ancient Peruvians seem to have made much less account of it than their Spanish conquerors, and to have valued the llama, in common with the other animals of that genus, chiefly, for its fleece. Immense herds of these 'large cattle,' as they were called, and of the 'smaller cattle,' or *alpacas*, were held by the government, as already noticed, and placed under the direction of shepherds, who conducted them from one quarter of the country to another, according to the changes of the season. These migrations were regulated with all the precision with which the code of the *mesta* determined the migrations of the vast merino flocks in Spain; and the conquerers when they landed in Peru, were amazed at finding a race of animals so similar to their own in properties and habits, and under the control of a system of legislation which might seem to have been imported from their native land. But the richest store of wool was obtained, not from these domesticated animals, but from the two other species, the *huanacos* and the *vicunas*, which roamed in native freedom over the frozen ranges of the Cordilleras; where not unfrequently they might be seen scaling the snow-covered peaks which no living thing inhabits save the condor, the huge bird of the Andes, whose broad pinions bear him up in the atmosphere to the height of more than twenty thousand feet above the level of the sea. In these rugged pastures, 'the flock without a fold' finds sufficient sustenance in the *ychu*, a species of grass which is found scattered all along the great ridge of the Cordilleras, from the equator to the southern limits of Patagonia. And as these limits define the territory traversed by the Peruvian sheep, which rarely, if ever, venture north of the line, it seems not improbable that this mysterious little plant is so important to their existence, that the absence of it is the principal reason why they have not penetrated to the northern latitudes of Quito and New Granada.'

Let us now glance at the political and religious elements of a system which produced such wondrous results. The government of the Incas exhibited the rare anomaly of an absolute despotism supported, but not controlled, by a powerful aristocracy.

'The sovereign was placed at an immeasurable distance above his subjects. Even the proudest of the Inca nobility, claiming a descent from the same divine original as himself, could not venture into the royal presence unless barefoot, and bearing a light burden on his shoulders in token of homage. As the representative of the Sun, he stood at the head of the priesthood, and presided at the most important of the religious festivals. He raised armies and usually commanded them in person. He imposed taxes, made laws, and provided for their execution by the appointment of judges, whom he removed at pleasure. He was the source from which everything flowed—all dignity, all power, all emolument. He was, in short, in the well known phrase of the European despot, 'himself the state.' The Inca asserted his claims as a superior being by assuming a pomp in his manner of living well calculated to impose on his people. His dress was of the finest wool of the vicuna, richly dyed, and ornamented with a profu-